



Thailand

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it does not register new religious groups that have not been accepted into one of the existing religious governing bodies on doctrinal or other grounds. In practice, unregistered religious organizations operate freely, and the Government's practice of not recognizing any new religious faiths has not restricted the activities of unregistered religious groups. The Government officially limits the number of foreign missionaries that may work in the country, although unregistered missionaries are present in large numbers and are allowed to live and work freely.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. While continuing separatist violence in the southernmost provinces led to increased localized tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities, religious practices were not significantly inhibited.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 198,000 square miles, and its population is an estimated 64 million. In a 2000 survey, more than 99 percent of the population professed some religious belief or faith. According to the Government's National Statistics Office, approximately 94 percent of the population is Buddhist and 5 percent is Muslim; however, estimates by nongovernmental organizations, academics, and religious groups state that approximately 85 to 90 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and up to 10 percent of the population is Muslim. There are small animist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Taoist populations. No official statistics exist as to the numbers of atheists or persons who do not profess a religious faith or belief, but surveys indicate that together they make up less than 1 percent of the population.

The dominant religion is Theravada Buddhism. The Buddhist clergy, or Sangha, consists of two main schools, which are governed by the same ecclesiastical hierarchy. Monks belonging to the older Mahanikaya school far outnumber those of the Dhammayuttika school, an order that grew out of a 19th-century reform movement led by King Mongkut (Rama IV).

Islam is the dominant religion in four of the five southernmost provinces, which border Malaysia. The majority of Muslims are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population encompasses groups of diverse ethnic and national origin, including descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The Religious Affairs Department (RAD) reports that there are 3,479 registered mosques in 64 provinces, with the largest number in Pattani Province. The majority of these mosques are associated with the Sunni branch of Islam. The remainder, estimated by the RAD to be from 1 to 2 percent of the total, are associated with the Shi'a branch of Islam.

According to government statistics, there are an estimated 486,800 Christians in the country, constituting 0.8 percent of the population. There are several Protestant denominations, and most belong to one of four umbrella organizations. The oldest of these groupings, the Church of Christ in Thailand, was formed in the mid-1930s. The largest is the Evangelical Foundation of Thailand. Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists are recognized by authorities as separate Protestant denominations and are organized under similar umbrella groups.

There are nine tribal groups (chao khao) recognized by the Government, with an estimated population of 500,000 to 600,000 persons. Syncretistic practices drawn from Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and spirit worship are common. The Sikh Council of Thailand estimates the Sikh community to have a population of approximately 70,000 persons, most of which reside in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Pattaya, and Phuket. There are currently 17 Sikh temples in the country. According to government statistics, there are an estimated 2,900 Hindus in the country, although Hindu organizations estimate the population to be closer to 10,000 persons.

The ethnic Chinese minority (Sino-Thai) has retained some popular religious traditions from China, including adherence to popular Taoist beliefs. Members of the Mien hill tribe follow a form of Taoism.

Mahayana Buddhism is practiced primarily by small groups of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. There are more than 675 Chinese and Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist shrines and temples throughout the country.

Citizens proselytize freely. Monks working as Buddhist missionaries (Dhammaduta) have been active since the end of World War II, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations. As of May 2005, there were approximately 3,230 Dhammaduta working in the country. In addition, during the period covered by this report, the Government sponsored the international travel of another 1,038 Buddhist monks sent by their temples to disseminate religious information to 25 countries. Muslim organizations reported having small numbers of citizens working as missionaries in the country and abroad. Christian organizations reported much larger numbers of missionaries, both foreign and Thai, operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it restricts the activities of some groups. The Constitution requires that the monarch be a Buddhist. The state religion in effect is Theravada Buddhism; however, it is not officially designated as such.

The Constitution states that discrimination against a person on the grounds of "a difference in religious belief" shall not be permitted. There was no significant pattern of religious discrimination during the period covered by this report. The Government maintained longstanding policies designed to integrate southern Muslim communities into society through developmental efforts and expanded educational opportunities, as well as policies designed to increase the number of appointments to local and provincial positions where Muslims traditionally have been underrepresented.

The Government plays an active role in religious affairs. The RAD, which is located in the Ministry of Culture, registers religious organizations. Under the provisions of the Religious Organizations Act, the RAD recognizes a new religion if a national census shows that it has at least 5,000 adherents, has a uniquely recognizable theology, and is not politically active. A religious organization also must be accepted into an officially recognized ecclesiastical group before the RAD will grant registration. During the period covered by this report, there were five such groups: the Buddhist community, the Muslim community, the Brahmin-Hindu community, the Sikh community, and the Catholic community, which includes four Protestant sub-groups. Government registration confers some benefits, including access to state subsidies, tax-exempt status, and preferential allocation of resident visas for organization officials. However, since 1984 the Government has not recognized any new religious faiths. In practice, unregistered religious organizations operate freely, and the Government's practice of not recognizing any new religious faiths has not restricted the activities of unregistered religious groups.

The Constitution requires the Government "to patronize and protect Buddhism and other religions." The State subsidizes the activities of the three largest religious communities (Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian). The Government allocated approximately \$41 million (1.6 billion baht) during fiscal year 2005 to support the National Buddhism Bureau, which was established in 2002 as a separate independent state agency. The office oversees the Buddhist clergy and approved the curricula of Buddhist teachings for all Buddhist temples of educational institutions. In addition, the Bureau promotes the Buddhist faith by sponsoring educational and public relations materials on the faith and practice in daily life by the people.

For fiscal year 2005, the Government, through the RAD, allocated \$1.1 million for Islamic organizations, \$56,210 for Christian organizations, and \$15,385 for Brahman-Hindu and Sikh organizations.

The budgets for Buddhist and Muslim organizations included funds to support Buddhist and Muslim institutes of higher education, fund religious education programs in public and private schools, provide daily allowances for monks and Muslim clerics who hold administrative and senior ecclesiastical posts, and subsidize travel and health care for monks and Muslim clerics. This figure also included an annual budget for the renovation and repair of Buddhist temples and Muslim mosques, the maintenance of historic Buddhist sites, and the daily upkeep of the central mosque in Pattani. Catholic and Protestant groups can request government support for renovation and repair work but do not receive a regular budget to maintain church buildings, nor do they receive government assistance to support their clergy. Private donations to registered religious organizations are tax deductible.

Religious instruction is required in public schools at both the primary, grades 1 through 6, and secondary, grades 7 through 12, education levels. The Ministry of Education has formulated a new course called "Social, Religion, and Culture Studies," which students in each grade study for 1 to 2 hours each week. The course contains information about all of the recognized religions in the country--Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Brahmin/Hinduism, and Sikh. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of other religions or of their belief may study at the religious schools and can transfer credits to the public school. Schools, working in conjunction with their local school administrative board, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. The Supreme Sangha Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand have created special curriculums for Buddhist and Islamic studies.

There are a variety of Islamic education opportunities for children. Tadika is an after-school religious course for children in grades one through six, which is under the supervision of the RAD and generally takes place in a mosque. There are currently 1,621 registered Islamic Religious and Moral Education centers teaching Tadika, with approximately 173,000 students and more than 4,000 teachers. For secondary school children, the Ministry of Education allows two separate curricula for private Islamic studies schools. The first type teaches only Islamic religious courses. More than 311 schools nationwide with approximately 30,461 students and 6,011 teachers use this curriculum. The Government registers but does not certify these schools, and students from these schools cannot continue to any higher education within the country. The second curriculum teaches both Islamic religious courses and traditional state education coursework. Approximately 200 schools nationwide with more than 108,000 students and 4,450 teachers use this curriculum. The Government recognizes these private schools, and graduating students can continue to higher education within the country. A third type of Islamic education available, mostly in the southern part of the country, is traditional pondok schools. During the period covered by this report, the Government registered 309 pondok schools in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. Previously, these religious schools were not required to register with the Government and received no government oversight or funding. The registration effort began in April 2004 in response to the increased separatist violence following an attack on a military post and arms depot in Narathiwat in January 2004. Government investigations following that incident led the authorities to pursue suspects associated with pondok schools. The total number of pondoks, students, and teachers is unknown. Sources believe that there could be several hundred to 1,000 pondoks in the south.

The Government actively sponsors interfaith dialogue in accordance with the Constitution, which requires the State to "promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions." The Government funds regular meetings and public education programs. These programs included the RAD annual interfaith meeting for representatives and members of all religious groups certified by RAD. The programs also included monthly meetings of the 17-member Subcommittee on Religious Relations, located within the Prime Minister's National Identity Promotion Office (the subcommittee is composed of one representative from the Buddhist, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Hindu, and Sikh communities in addition to civil servants from several government agencies). In September 2004, the RAD organized a national interreligious assembly in Chonburi which had 800 participants and sponsored a National Day of Interreligious Reconciliation on April 10, 2005, which included a gathering of religious leaders and a prayer service at the Suan Amphorn grounds in Bangkok. The RAD sponsored a public relations campaign promoting interreligious understanding and harmony, including prime-time television announcements. However, a continuing separatist insurgency by some militant ethnic Malay Muslims in the far southern region of the country led to continuing concerns that the violence may be contributing to increased tensions between the local Buddhist and Muslim communities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, government officials, at the request of Chinese government officials, have reportedly monitored Falun Gong members. During the period covered by this report, no action was announced by the Government on the two pending applications submitted by the local Falun Gong group. One application was submitted to register as an association with the Office of the National Cultural Commission and a second was submitted to the Police Department to print and distribute a weekly Falun Gong magazine. The group was able to print and distribute religious materials both in Thai and Chinese on a small, informal basis for free distribution. The Thai language daily newspaper Matichon reported in December 2004 that the Special Branch Police had discovered plans for a Falun Gong meeting in Bangkok the same month. The newspaper reported that the organizers agreed to cancel the meeting and that the foreign national Falun Gong practitioners visiting the country to attend the meeting had left voluntarily.

The Government does not recognize religious faiths other than the five existing groupings. However, unregistered religious organizations operate freely.

Although unregistered missionaries are present in large numbers, the number of foreign missionaries registered with the Government is limited to a quota that originally was established by the RAD in 1982. The quota is divided along both religious and denominational lines. At the end of 2004, there were 1,243 registered foreign missionaries in the country, most of them Christian. In addition to these formal quotas, far more missionaries, while not registered, are able to live and work in the country without government interference. While registration conferred some benefits, such as longer terms for visa stays, being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized or disseminated religious literature without the acknowledgment of the RAD. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were deported or harassed for working without registration, although the activities of Muslim professors and clerics were subjected disproportionately to scrutiny on national security grounds because of continued government concern about the resurgence of Muslim separatist activities in the south.

The Constitution provides for, and citizens generally enjoy, a large measure of freedom of speech; however, laws prohibiting speech likely to insult Buddhism remain in place. The 1962 Sangha Act specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy. The Penal Code prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all of the recognized religions in the country.

National identity cards produced by the Ministry of Interior include an optional designation of the religious affiliation of the holder. Persons who fail or choose not to indicate religious affiliation in their applications can be issued cards without religious information.

Muslim female civil servants are not permitted to wear headscarves when dressed in civil servant uniforms. However, in practice

most female civil servants are permitted by their superiors to wear headscarves if they wish, particularly in the country's southernmost provinces. Muslim female civil servants not required to wear uniforms are allowed to wear headscarves.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Violent acts committed by suspected Islamic militants in the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla, and Yala have affected the ability of some Buddhists in this predominantly Muslim region to undertake the full range of their traditional religious practices. During the period covered by this report, there were no cases of Buddhist monks being killed in separatist violence. On March 24, 2005, a monk was injured by a bomb in Yala province. Three others were injured in separate incidents in June 2005. The monks were performing the morning ritual of receiving donations of food and were guarded by three armed soldiers. In June 2005, eight civilians were beheaded in six separate incidents. Some observers in the south, including some Muslim leaders, described these incidents as reprisal killings for the arrest and/or killing of suspected Muslim militants by authorities. At the end of the period covered by this report, no one had been arrested for the 2004 murder of three Buddhist monks and the beheading of one civilian Buddhist rubber tapper or for the 2004 attacks on Buddhist temples and one Chinese shrine in the southern provinces of the country. The Government continued to investigate these incidents in the context of security operations involving the on-going separatist violence in the South. Buddhist monks continued to report that they were fearful and thus no longer able to travel freely through southern communities to receive alms. They also claimed that laypersons sometimes declined to assist them in their daily activities out of fear of being targeted by militants.

Militants continued to assassinate minor government officials, such as village Headmen, teachers, and local Tambon (sub-district) council members, in the southern part of the country on an almost daily basis. Many government officials and law enforcement authorities presumed the slain Buddhist monks and laypersons who had no government affiliation were targeted solely because of their religious beliefs in an attempt by separatist militants to increase interfaith tensions. The level of interfaith tension varied greatly from district to district, and in some locales, even from village to village. The violence contributed to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in the southern provinces. However, while the level of tension between local Islamic and Buddhist communities was heightened, it did not result in open communal conflict.

In response to the killings, the Government stationed troops to protect the religious practitioners and structures of all faiths in communities where the potential for violence existed and provided armed escort for Buddhist monks, where necessary, for their daily rounds to receive alms. The Government has not officially paid compensation to the families of 106 Islamic militants slain while attacking security forces on April 28, 2004. The Government allocated \$218,000 for the restoration of the Krue Se Mosque, which soldiers damaged during the fighting. During the period covered by this report, most of the restoration was completed.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversions, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Religious groups closely associated with ethnic minorities, such as Muslims, experienced some societal economic discrimination; however, such discrimination appeared to be linked more to ethnicity than to religion. Continued violence in the far southern regions of the country contributed to negative stereotypes of Muslims held by persons from other geographic areas of the country. Murders, including beheadings, and bombings clearly targeted at Buddhists, increased ethnic tensions between Muslim and Buddhist communities in the far south.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officers regularly visit Muslim religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the Embassy's goal of understanding the complex ethnic and religious issues at play in society.

During the period covered by this report, three Thai Muslims from a broad range of professions participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), which is the flagship professional exchange program of the Department of State and serves to introduce young professionals from a wide variety of fields to the U.S. at an early stage in their professional development. In May 2005, 11 Thai Muslims were nominated for the 2006 IVLP program.

Released on November 8, 2005

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